Woodturning in Basic Black

By Alan Lacer

Woodturners and woodworkers have long valued the use of woods either colored black or naturally having that color. The first turning book in the Western world (*Le Art De Tourner* by P. C. Plumier, first edition 1701) offers no less than five recipes for the ebonizing of wood—more than for any other color. African ebony has been highly valued for its richness, density, and almost jewel-like qualities for millenniums.

So what stands behind this enduring interest in black or blackened wood, both by makers and viewers of such work? The color black has more complexity behind it than perhaps any other color—it is even debated whether black is a color. There is certainly the psychology of black, its conflicting and often contradictory meanings and associations. Plus there is the visual impact of black as the only color used or when effectively used, in conjunction with other colors. The role of black and its impact can readily change by how it is used by the artist.

Woodturning in Basic Black, *an exhibit sponsored by the AAW, opened Nov. 1 at Sculptured Objects & Functional Art (SOFA) Chicago. Alan Lacer's essay first appeared in the* SOFA Chicago 2007 *catalog. Reprinted with permission.*

A piece of wood blackened with heavy pigments, grain filled with either finish or filler, could imitate pottery, glass, plastic, or metal—it may well be hard to know the material except through closer inspection. However, a blackened wooden piece that retains its pores and grain patterns is unmistakably wood—it has its own power and presence that separates it from these other materials.

"Hollow-Faceted Chunk" by Jim Partridge. 14½×11¾×11¾".

The color of black

Anyone attempting to color wood black will make several observations. First, black is not always, well, just black. Sometimes there are hints of red, blue, violet, brown, or gray working through the black. Another challenge is finding a coloring process that allows the artist to achieve the desired look he/she is after and the fact that end-grain and face/side grain react to coloring techniques quite differently. Moreover, in some techniques, the underlying wood might contribute its own color or change the color of the blackening process to something less desirable than intended.

Woodturners who construct three-dimensional work in the round face their own set of concerns. In an all-black piece you cannot hide the form from the viewer—it is a naked form. Wood grain and other colors can fool the eye when it comes to judging a piece, even its shape. Black generally makes the form less competitive with other features or colors. This unusual aspect of blackened wood is sometimes invoked as a teaching technique to instruct good form development with woodturners. The completed turning is painted black in order to better evaluate the form absent of grain, figure, or color. Likewise the blackened turned work is not relying on highly figured or rich color of other hues to create eye-grabbing work.

"**Lidded Vessel**" by Matthew Hill. Maple; 8½×8½". This piece is included in the *Basic Black* exhibit.

Photo: Carl Shortt

"**Irish Ebony Bowl**" by Ciaran Forbes. Bog oak; 6×7x8".

Photo: David Ellsworth

When used in combination with other colors, black can make colors more intense or call attention to details on a woodturning. An all-black turning except for a few details, makes these details explode or at least brings the eye to quickly focus upon them. In the case of large-pored woods created in black, with the pores filled with another color such as white, a striking surface effect will be created. In these cases black is excellent at framing or highlighting important details of the work.

Taking this thought a bit further, black often does more to reveal than hide. Have you ever heard it said that black clothing shows everything? Black in an unusual way illuminates—which one would think is only the domain of bright lights. Imagine a remote and rural farmhouse on a very dark night. A single light from that house draws attention to the farm, but it may very well be that it is not the light that calls attention, but the darkness that surrounds the house. If it was a bright day or there were many farmhouses all lit up at night in close proximity, that single farmhouse might well go unnoticed by the viewer. Black is excellent at framing what you desire to see or emphasize—is that not what a black picture frame or black matting does to a painting or photograph?

Other media certainly have explored and exploited the powerful features of black. The painters Pierre Soulages, Robert Rauschenberg, and Frank Stella created works that explored the power of just black, mixtures of black with other colors, or the power of light as it falls onto black—revealing the depth and complexity of it. Raku pottery has its own beauty with regions and streaks of black from the firing process. The work of Pueblo potters from Santa Clara and San Ildefonso such as Maria Martinez, and Hopi potter Nampeyo, are in a league of their own in terms of elegance, beauty and mystery of their black-on-black pottery.

Black turning stock

Creating the impact of an all or partially black piece has several sources for woodworkers. There are woods that are quite black in their highest grades: ebony, African blackwood, and bog oak, sometimes called Irish ebony.

Basic Black at AAW Gallery

An encore exhibit of *Woodturning in Basic Black*, featuring many pieces from the SOFA Chicago exhibit, will be on display Jan. 11–April 18 at the AAW Gallery in St. Paul.

Gabon ebony is often considered the blackest and most consistently black form of ebony. This wood has been valued since ancient times—used as a symbol of wealth, power, trade, or as a form of currency. Other varieties of ebony (or lower-grade Gabon ebony) might have brown or white streaking, which can be beautiful in its own right. African blackwood, a true rosewood, is another source of blackish wood but with larger open pores than ebony and lacking some of its deep black richness.

A Mexican wood, katalox, is a source of very black wood, although it's a rather small tree with lots of white sapwood. Another African wood, wenge, almost looks all black, but really is a mix of black and brown. American persimmon is a true ebony and may have rich areas of deep black, sometimes referred to as carbon, or almost always has flecks of black in the wood.

One of the most fascinating sources of naturally colored black wood is timber (especially oaks) buried in peat bogs in areas of Ireland and Scotland. Logs that have lain in the highly acidic peat bogs of this region, combined with their own tannic acid and iron from the soil, impart a wonderful deep black color to the wood. The process is a slow one, often occurring over thousands of years. Similarly, buried ancient logs found in Japan also produce this rich black coloring. This wood, called *umoregi* in Japanese, has really reached the level of petrified wood, but can still be shaped into wonderful objects. Its look can be almost the same as ebony, with some figure to the material, but certainly much harder.

"Creating a wood-turned piece that is totally black is truly a challenge. Given the absence of color, the onus is put upon form, with secondary elements of the piece responsible for holding attention, and providing opportunities for discovery and subtle surprises."

– Molly Winton

"**Night Run**" by Molly Winton is part of the *Basic Black* exhibit. Cherry; 5¾×3¾".

Adding black

Naturally occurring black woods are rare in a world that commercially lumbers over 8,000 different types of wood. In reaction to this reality, woodworkers and woodturners have resorted to coloring the wood black. Woodturners in particular have taken this blackening process in many different directions. One method is by fire: charring in a fire or with a torch, sometimes wire-brushed or sanded, sometimes oiled and burnished, to achieve the deep charcoal black that is often the target. The amount and depth of the burning can create quite a variation of effects.

Arizona woodturner Phil Brennion utilizes one of the more unusual methods of fire—he covers the piece with gunpowder, and ignites the powder to produce regions of black for a wonderful black speckled look that gives an ancient look to his work. Another way to blacken is by using friction while pieces are spinning on a lathe. A simple wire can create lines of black by burning into the wood, while a piece of heavy cardboard held against the spinning wood—usually at a very high speed—can create larger zones of black.

Today most black pieces are created using more traditional or obvious wood coloring techniques. There is a wide range of methods, utilizing everything from printer's inks (in paste form), India ink, acrylic- and oil-based paints, spray paints from a can, extractions of logwood, leather dyes, aniline dyes made from coal, traditional fabric dyes, pigmented paints (such as oil base or acrylic), black gesso,

pigmented stains, lacquer mixed with graphite, nails or steel wool soaked in vinegar.

One of the most intense practices of coloring wood black is the process of Japanese lacquer (*urushi*). The urushi culture of Japan has a history dating back 6,000 years. Made from the sap of a tree, this process requires great skill and considerable time to achieve the rich black, wet-looking color. The processed sap, with the addition of either iron or carbon black, creates this effect.

Today black is the most widely used color in urushi, either alone or in combination with other colors or materials such as powdered gold and silver.

The impact of the blackening often depends on whether the wood is colored with dyes or pigments to achieve the effect. Think of the use of pigments as painting—small particles of color mixed with binders—while the use of a dye is much like dying fabric. Dying generally gives greater depth of coloring and more clarity, as the material is absorbing color rather than just having it floating on its surface as is the case with pigments. Each approach has its practitioners and each has its strengths and weaknesses. If you make use of pigments, the color of the wood has not quite the same factor of darkness as dye stains.

The downside of pigments is that they tend to obscure the figure and natural color of the wood more so than dyes, but this might be desirable. With dyes there tends to be more clarity, if applied well, and more control over the shading of the color. Each new coat tends to darken the color, even black, whereas multiple coats of pigments, once a good base is established, will be the shade of the original pigment—remember pigments are just tiny particles of the same color. The inherent color of dyed wood contributes to the overall effect—whether desired or not. For example, the same colored dye on maple will look quite different over a red mahogany. The pigment approach will tend to color both woods more uniformly, with one great difference—maple tends to look sploshy from pigments, but looks great with dyes. A lesson to be learned when you try to color wood: Different species of wood, and sometimes individual pieces of wood, often react differently to different techniques.

The challenge for artists working in wood is to use black effectively, given its many forms and variations, the many reactions it can evoke, the variety of techniques—all point to the depth and range of this color. Explore this special exhibit slowly and methodically—and be prepared to experience the richness of black with a new appreciation.

"**Lagniappe**" by Gorst du Plessis is part of the *Basic Black* exhibit. African Blackwood and turquoise; 7½×3".

"Black is the absolute color where form rules."

– Gorst du Plessis

Photos: Tib Shaw/AAW

"**Inner Rimmed Vessel**" by Liam Flynn is one of the pieces in the *Basic Black* exhibit. Oak; 13×8". In this piece, carving adds patterns but also changes the way light plays along the surface of the blackened work. "At its most basic, black works for me because it removes any distractions from material. What interests me primarily are form and texture, and how the grain structure interacts with the line of the vessel. The blackening process that I use does not obliterate the grain; instead it brings the structure of the wood into a sharper focus."

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